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## NEW BOOKS REVIEWED.

BY PHILIP LORING ALLEN AND JAMES HUNCKER.

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### NORMAN DUNCAN'S NEW NOVEL.\*

THE paradox of Norman Duncan as a writer is that his fondness for situations, characters and incidents odd and whimsical to the verge of grotesqueness, should be supported by an imagination so fine, so tender and so poetic. If he could be imagined as executing some mad contract to take the subject-matter of a novel bodily from the comic weeklies, there would still be nobility and dignity in the book as it came from his pen. On the other hand, the most sodden or lugubrious theme could similarly be lightened by his true and human touch.

Nothing that Mr. Duncan has written illustrates better this characteristic blending of qualities than his latest book, "The Cruise of the 'Shining Light.'" Humor it has, and pathos, but not in the conventional "flashes" or "touches." Both are pervasive, which is perhaps only another way of saying that, for all its fantasies, the book delineates real life. It is hard to speak critically of this story without pointing a parallel to Dickens. But to be fair the comparison must begin and end with the material in the novelist's hands. We can imagine that master story-teller seizing with delight almost every element of this story and then abandoning himself to it in such a way as to make a totally different book, probably lacking, after all, that blending and background which give Mr. Duncan's work so much of its charm. One might quote of it Aldrich's quatrain:

"Black Tragedy lets slip her grim disguise  
And shows you laughing cheeks and roguish eyes;  
But when, unmasked, gay Comedy appears,  
How wan her cheeks are, and what heavy tears."

\* "The Cruise of the 'Shining Light.'" By Norman Duncan. New York and London: Harper & Brothers.

And that these dainty lines should apply so aptly to one who writes of the toil and struggle of uncouth men in a wild northern land is a second anomaly.

We have here the story of Skipper Nicholas Top, of Twist Tickle, a misshapen, scarred old mariner who, in fulfilling a promise made to a dying shipmate, the lad's father, is bringing up young Dannie Callaway by the letter of Chesterfield's maxims, and his own creed of "standin'" by. "He've wonderful good ideas on the subjeck o' manners," says the Skipper of Chesterfield, "an' a raft of un, too; but the ideas he've got on souls, Dannie, is poor an' sort o' damned scarce." How the means were provided for the rearing of the elegant and bejewelled young gentleman is the "wretched puzzle" which runs through the story. Mr. Duncan left his readers no clue to the mystery of "Dr. Luke of the 'Labrador.'" The reader is glad, however, that Dannie, who is made the narrator in this book, insists on a full understanding of his circumstances before offering himself to Judith, the little maid with whom he had played on the deck of the "Shining Light."

Some episodes, by the way, are practically separate stories. Such are the accounts of the death-bed conversion of Judith's erring mother, and the quest for a wife of the fool of Twist Tickle. The former is a grim sketch of a type of Newfoundland parson, inflexible with others and himself a martyr to duty, who orders child and friend from the room in order to force the dying woman to "repent" with her last breath. The fool's wooing is a bit of tragi-comedy which invites the comment of the Virginian on the career of the "Emily Hen"—"It ain't so damn funny, after all."

We have Mr. Duncan's word for it that Nicholas Top, first conceived as a minor character, forced himself, so to speak, against his creator's will, into the chief place. Yet the treatment of that lovable troglodyte remains a capital illustration of the author's scrupulous restraint, and in this case his restraint is in another sense an expression of sympathy. He will not let us laugh at the old man, no matter what preposterous or wrong-headed thing he may be doing. Dannie, as he appears here in the first person, tells his story like one who is willing to explain all, and knows that some of it is amusing, but would resent on the instant any sneer at his benefactor. The obligation of respect is impressed

upon the reader, just as it was upon the London tutor brought to Newfoundland to teach the boy:

"My uncle stumped on ahead, his wooden leg as blithe as the sound one, and was waiting in his humble quarters, with gnomelike leer of expectation, when we entered. Neither my watch, set with its shy jewels, nor my sparkling fingers, nor the cut and quality and fit of my London-made clothes, which came close to perfection, nor anything concerning me, had caused my tutor even so much as to lift an eyebrow of surprise; but the appearance of the table, laid in the usual way, gave him an indubitable fit of amazement; for, as was our custom on the neck of land by the Lost Soul, at the one end, where sat the luxurious Dannie Callaway, by no will of his own, was the glitter of silver, the flash and glow of delicate china, a flower or more from our garden, exquisite napery, the bounties of the kindly earth, whatever the cost; but at the other (the napery abruptly ceasing at the centre of the table because of the wear and tear that might chance) was set out, upon coarse ware, even to tin, fare of common description, forecastle fare, fisherman fare, unrelieved by any grace of flower or linen or glitter of glass, by any grace at all, save the grace of a black bottle, which, according to my experience, was sufficient to my uncle and such rough folk as dined with him. 'Twas no cause for surprise to me, to whom the enigma had been familiar from the beginning; but my tutor, come suddenly against the puzzle, was nonplussed, small blame to him.

"'Parson,' says my uncle, '*you*—goes steerage!'

"My tutor started, regarded my uncle with a little jerk of astonishment; and his eyebrows went high—but still conveyed no more than polite inquiry. 'I beg your pardon?' he apologized.

"'Steerage, parson!' my uncle repeated. 'Steerage passage, sir, the night!'

"'Really!'

"'Tis the same as sayin',' I made haste to explain, 'that you dines along o' Uncle Nick at *his* end.'"

"'Sit ye!' says my uncle, 'an' fall to!' his face all broke into smiles. 'Fall to, parson, an' spare nothin'. Better the salt-junk o' toil,' he improvised, in bold imitation of the Scripture, to my tutor's further astonishment, 'than the ice-cream o' crime.'"

It would be just as improper to laugh in the face of little Judith when she pictured her maker as:

"A rotund, florid old gentleman, with the briefest, most wiry of sandy whiskers upon his chops, a jolly double chin, a sunburned nose, kindly blue eyes forever opened in mild wonder (and a bit bleared by the wind), the fat figure clad in broadly checked tweed knickerbockers and a rakish cap to match, like the mad tourists who sometimes strayed our way."

"I come down from heaven one year an' five months after God sent you," said Judith after she had called Dannie a fool and he

had quoted Scripture; "an' God *told* me, Dannie, before I left Un at the Gate, that He'd changed his mind about that." There is chivalry mingled with the amusement of the lad who tells it. Clearly drawn as are the other characters, they are not more alive than this same Dannie. If he was a product of Nicholas Top's upbringing, that would alone go far to the old skipper's redemption.

There is no "cruise" in the book save a very brief one in pursuit of Judith, and this does not furnish a tenth part of the tale. So it is not properly a sea-story, but one about seafaring people. Mr. Duncan has been the interpreter of Newfoundland to American readers. For this function he has never depended on photographic description, but rather on a peculiar gift for conveying spirit and atmosphere. He has here attempted what is essentially a new task for him in portraying the sea. He has few equals to-day in expressing its terror, its grim and savage moods. His best piece of short fiction, "A Beat to Harbor," which tells the story of a captain afraid of the sea and reckless for the very reason that he had so accurately measured his enemy's strength against his own, is a study that perhaps no other living writer could have compassed. But here he must write as a joyous lover of the ocean:

"Born as I am—a Newfoundlander to the marrow of my body and the innermost parts of my soul—my heart puts to sea, unfaillingly, whatever the ease and security of my place, when the wind blows high in the night and the great sea rages. 'Tis a fine heritage we have, we outport Newfoundlanders—this feeling for the toss and tumult and dripping cold of the sea: this sympathy born of self-same experience. I'd not exchange it, with the riches of cities to boot, for the thin-lipped, gray, cold-eyed astuteness, the pomp and splendid masks of the marts and avenues I have seen in my time."

It cannot be said that Mr. Duncan interprets this mood so successfully as those more sombre. Stout hearts and brave spirits he knows, but the promised note of exultation is hardly audible in what is written here of the perils of the sea. Possibly the cry of,

"... give to me the snoring breeze  
And white waves heaving high,"

was never heard on the real "world of waters." But the cruise with Norman Duncan as skipper is invigorating, and it ends in a sunny haven.

PHILIP LORING ALLEN.